

## WHENCE WISDOM

Last Sunday, we concluded our readings in 1 and 2 Samuel, and despite Jen's masterful sermon I wouldn't be surprised if you were ready to be done with David and Absalom, and move on. Which is what happens when we enter the books of Kings, or rather the "book" of Kings, since as was the case with 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings was originally one book. Covering over 400 hundred years of history, the book of Kings opens with the death of David and the ascension of Solomon. It goes on to cover Solomon's building of the temple, how things fell apart under Solomon, the divided kingdom, and ultimately, the fall of both Samaria and Jerusalem.

The lectionary passage we heard this morning involves some convenient cut and pasting which both simplifies the narrative in order to make a point, but also steers clear of signs of trouble for Solomon present at the very beginning of the story. After we learn of the death of David in a couple of select verses from chapter 2 we skip not to chapter three verse one but to the third verse of chapter 3 conveniently avoiding one of Solomon's earliest acts of governing, which was not asking God for wisdom, but rather, making a marriage alliance with of all nations – Egypt. Yes, those folks from who the Israelites had thrown off their bondage and fled so long ago. This is somewhat understandable because Solomon's ascension to the throne was not guaranteed – he was not, after all, David's first-born son. Even so, any sort of agreement with Egypt should tip us off that while things may look good at first, something's up. More importantly, it reminds us that Solomon, for all his wisdom, is an imperfect human being – like us. We can enter into his plea for wisdom, because it is so often our plea as well.

And who couldn't use greater wisdom, especially these days. Even a functional Magic 8 Ball would be nice: "Magic 8 Ball – will we be past the pandemic by Rally Sunday?" "Reply hazy, try again." At times, we may not even be certain that wisdom is indeed what we desire or most need. A parishioner once shared the following joke with me:

A angel appears at a faculty meeting and tells the dean  
that in return for his unselfish and exemplary behavior,  
the Lord will reward his with his choice of infinite wealth, wisdom,  
or beauty.

Without hesitating, the dean selects infinite wisdom.

"Done!" says the angel, and disappears in a cloud of smoke  
and a bolt of lightening.

Now, all heads turn toward the dean,  
who sits surrounded by a faint halo of light.

One of his colleagues whispers, "Say something."

The dean signs and say, "I should have taken the money."

Solomon, for his part, asks for wisdom, or more specifically:

Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil;

If we had continued our reading further into chapter 3 would have seen that upon awakening from his dream encounter with God has his newly bestowed wisdom put to the test.

Later, two women who were prostitutes came to the king and stood before him. One woman said, ‘Please, my lord, this woman and I live in the same house; and I gave birth while she was in the house. Then on the third day after I gave birth, this woman also gave birth. We were together; there was no one else with us in the house, only the two of us were in the house. Then this woman’s son died in the night, because she lay on him. She got up in the middle of the night and took my son from beside me while your servant slept. She laid him at her breast, and laid her dead son at my breast. When I rose in the morning to nurse my son, I saw that he was dead; but when I looked at him closely in the morning, clearly it was not the son I had borne.’ But the other woman said, ‘No, the living son is mine, and the dead son is yours.’ The first said, ‘No, the dead son is yours, and the living son is mine.’ So they argued before the king.

Then the king said, ‘One says, “This is my son that is alive, and your son is dead”; while the other says, “Not so! Your son is dead, and my son is the living one.”’ So the king said, ‘Bring me a sword’, and they brought a sword before the king. The king said, ‘Divide the living boy in two; then give half to one, and half to the other.’ But the woman whose son was alive said to the king—because compassion for her son burned within her—‘Please, my lord, give her the living boy; certainly do not kill him!’ The other said, ‘It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it.’ Then the king responded: ‘Give the first woman the living boy; do not kill him. She is his mother.’ All Israel heard of the judgement that the king had rendered; and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice.

I think this follow up story to Solomon’s encounter with God gives us a clue as to what Godly wisdom is all about. Ultimately, it’s about justice. When Solomon asked God for wisdom – “an understanding mind” We are told that, “It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.” Pastor Julian DeShazier notes:

...we please God when we seek the ways of God. When we seek to live to a standard worthy of our divinity. When we seek justice, love mercy, go with humility; when we care for the stranger, widow, and orphan; when we offer hospitality to God’s beloved at the margins.

This is where true wisdom is found. Not in endless amounts of data. Not going down the rabbit hole with internet searches. Not with partisan arguments designed to win more followers to a political party. Wisdom is found in looking to the least and the lost, those on the fringes, those yearning for justice. As Arianna Huffington noted several years ago:

The quest for knowledge may be pursued at higher speeds with smarter tools today, but wisdom is found no more readily than it was three thousand years ago in the court of King Solomon. In fact, ours is a generation bloated with information and starved for wisdom.

We are starved for wisdom because too often we are seeking it in the wrong places. Solomon, for all his ultimate failing, understood where true wisdom was to be found. Proverbs, a book probably not actually authored by Solomon but often attributed to him, emphasizes that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” This “fear” – or “awe” harkens back to Deuteronomy:

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord . . . for your own well-being. (Deut 10:12-13)

As we reflect on this ancient story of Solomon’s prayer for wisdom may we continually seek God’s ways in all that we do, aligning ourselves with God’s Spirit, following in the steps of Jesus, attending to our neighbor – all of our neighbors, and yes, even our enemies, surrendering our own egos, our grand plans, quests for fame and fortune, and so stilling ourselves – our hearts and minds – that we can discern God’s stillspeaking voice calling us into the path of true wisdom.

AMEN